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ABSTRACT

A perennial concern to educational administrators is the abuse of sick leave by school employees. Numerous suggestions have been offered for reducing the abuse of sick leave both within education and industry. This publication reviews 12 research studies that evaluate plans for reducing sick leave abuse among various categories of employees. Also reviewed are three unevaluated plans. Paid sick leave serves to relieve any possible economic burden on a professional employee who is ill, protect school children from the necessity of being exposed to a teacher with an illness which might be communicated to them, and obviate the problem of teachers performing at a low level of proficiency by reason of an incapacitating illness. However, there are occasions on which healthy employees take leave of their duties for other than reasons of sickness--but attribute their absences to personal illness. According to a review of the literature, at least two categories of plans have been devised to prevent such misuses of sick leave provisions: (1) the offering of rewards or bonuses for not using sick leave, and (2) the elimination of psychological and medical reasons for sick leave abuse. Studies pertaining to these categories are described herein, as well as methods that attempt to eliminate the reasons for sick leave abuse. (Author)

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METHODS OF REDUCING SICK LEAVE ABUSE

A perennial concern to educational administrators is the abuse of sick leave by school employees. Numerous suggestions have been offered for reducing the abuse of sick leave both within education and industry. This *Information Aid* reviews 12 research studies that evaluate plans for reducing sick leave abuse among various categories of employees. Also reviewed are three unevaluated plans.

The Purpose of Paid Sick Leave

Paid sick leave serves three vital purposes, as outlined by William Fearen, General Counsel for the Pennsylvania School Boards Association:

1. To relieve any possible economic burden on a professional employee who is ill.
2. To protect school children from the necessity of being exposed to a teacher with an illness which might be communicated to them.
3. To obviate the problem of teachers performing at a low level of proficiency by reason of an incapacitating illness.[1]

Yet, on occasion, healthy employees take leave of their duties for other than reasons of sickness--but attribute their absences to personal illness. According to a review of the literature, at least two categories of plans have been devised to prevent such misuses of sick leave provisions: (1) the offering of rewards or bonuses

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1. Fearen, William. "The Prostitution of Sick Leave--A Legal and Moral Issue." *PSAB Bulletin*: 28-29; November-December 1972.

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for not using sick leave, and (2) the elimination of psychological and medical reasons for sick leave abuse.[2] Studies pertaining to these categories are described below.

Studies Pertaining to Sick Leave Abuse

Rewards or bonuses. The rationale for *allowing unlimited accumulations of unused sick leave* is that employees will not be so likely to use sick leave unnecessarily if they know they will not lose unused days. Three studies that support the effectiveness of unlimited accumulations in reducing sick leave usage have been conducted in Rhode and New York. The earliest of these (as reported by Elsbree in 1939[3]) was a 1926 study of sick leave usage in Bristol, Rhode Island. Reportedly, teachers there had been granted unlimited sick leave accumulations--a factor that produced the lowest teacher absence rate then on record at the U. S. Office of Education.

The second study, conducted in 1954-55, involved 14 school districts in the New York City area. Three systems offering unlimited accumulations were compared with 11 districts that limited the accumulations of sick leave. The average days teachers were absent in the districts with unlimited sick leave accumulations was 2.9 days as compared to an average of 4.5 days in the other districts. Clerks in the three districts with unlimited accumulations averaged 2.6 days of absences while clerks in the other 11 districts averaged 5.4 days of absences. The differences in custodial absences were greater: 1.6 days average in the three districts as compared with 5.6 days in districts with limited accumulations of sick leave.[4]

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2. A third alternative--punitive measures against the abusers of sick leave policies--was not suggested in any of the plans reviewed for this report.

3. Elsbree, Willard S. *The American Teacher*. New York: The American Book Company, 1939. p. 496.

4. Data collected by Fred Brown (Director of Research, Great Neck, N. Y., Public Schools) and analyzed by H. M. Brickell (Manhasset Public Schools, N. Y.). Reported in: Kleinmann, Jack H. *Fringe Benefits for Public School Personnel*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1962. p. 62.

Similarly, the third study--relating to absenteeism among teachers for the three-year period 1965-68 in 12 school systems in Nassau County, New York--revealed that the absentee rate for teachers was 20 percent higher in districts with limited sick leave accumulation policies. The study focused on six districts having limited sick leave accumulations and six districts with maximum accumulations specified.[5]

Another group of studies focuses on *paying or providing some sort of reward* for minimal sick leave usage during a given period. The earliest plan reviewed was described by Ward G. Reeder in 1930 as follows: each teacher with perfect attendance at the end of each year (other than allowable absences for bereavement leave) received a bonus of $50; a $5 reduction was made for each day of sick leave used during the year.[6]

A plan providing bonuses for perfect attendance and for no more than one day's absence was tried at the SCREWCORP Division of VSI Corporation (City of Industry, California). During the six-month trial period, absences among production and maintenance employees decreased 38 percent as compared with the same six-month period of the previous year. The rate of decrease in sick leave usage for office and technical employees was 16 percent. Additionally, nine of the 26 office and technical employees had perfect attendance records as compared with 21 of the 116 production and maintenance employees.[7]

A third plan was developed in 1966 by a large retail hardware operation, while a fourth plan was implemented by a large urban school district. In the hardware business, employees with perfect attendance and punctuality records (excepting approved vacations and bereavement leaves) during the preceding month were eligible

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5. Nadler, Charles D. "How to Cut Costs By Cutting Teacher Absenteeism." *American School Board Journal* 159: 22; May 1972.

6. Reeder, Ward G. *The Fundamentals of Public School Administration*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930. p. 148.

7. Grove, Byron A. "Attendance Reward Plan Pays." *Personnel Journal* 47: 119-20; February 1968.

for a drawing for a $25 appliance. At the end of the six months, a drawing was held for a major prize--a colored TV set. The personnel department estimated that after three six-month cycles, sick leave payments were reduced 62 percent, but the improvement in the first year of the program, during which absenteeism and tardiness were reduced to one-fourth the prior levels, reportedly was not maintained at as high a level during the third six-month period.[8]

The urban school plan provided $50 for every teacher who had not been absent for an entire semester, excluding approved funeral and court attendance. The results showed that in the first semester of the first year, 41 percent of the teachers had perfect attendance records. This increased to 60 percent in the first semester of the second year. The percentage of perfect attendance declined thereafter, however, by the first semester of the fifth year.[9]

In another school system (the Lower Merion School District of Pennsylvania), calculations of sick leave usage for 1970-71 revealed that the more than 500 instructional staff members were absent 3,847.5 days for personal illness, family illness, personal reasons, absence with deductions, and excused absences. In an effort to reduce the sick leave usage, the administration offered the teachers' association (as a provision in the 1972-74 negotiated agreement) three additional insurance benefits for specified reductions in leave usage during 1972-73:

1. 75 reduced absences - the Blue Cross "Extended 365," or its equivalent;
2. 600 reduced absences - the Blue Cross "Extended 365," and Prescription Drug Plan ($1.00 deductible), or their equivalent;

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8. Nord, Walter. "Improving Attendance Through Rewards." *Personnel Administration* 33: 37-41; November-December 1970.

9. *Ibid.*

3. 1,000 reduced absences - the Blue Cross "Extended 365," Prescription Drug Plan, and the Blue Shield Dental Plan, or their equivalent.[10]

Insurance benefits earned during 1972-73 would be effective the following school year.

Tabulations of sick leave usage during 1972-73 revealed that the absences increased by 58.5 days over those recorded for 1970-71; therefore, instructional staff members were not provided with additional insurance coverage for 1973-74.[11]

Eliminating reasons for sick leave abuse. Four studies pertaining to the elimination of reasons for sick leave abuse were reviewed. All began with examinations of the attendance records of employees to determine when most absences occur and the categories of employees having the most absences.

A 1963 study of the civilian sick leave usage at Fort Huachuca (Arizona) revealed that the fort's personnel had the highest sick leave usage in the Army Materiel Command. A number of methods were tried to reduce sick leave usage including paycheck inserts giving information on cash value of accrued sick leave, free voluntary physical examinations for employees over 40, voluntary influenza immunizations, and mandatory checking in and out of the clinic--but to no avail. The plan that ultimately proved to be successful involved keeping an informal list of employees who called in sick together with the reported reasons for illness, followed by a visit by a public health nurse to a sampling of the absentees. During the three quarters succeeding the appointment of the public health nurse and the use of the daily absentee report, the sick leave rate at Fort Huachuca approximated the maximum accept-

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10. Information on the specific provisions of these plans can be obtained from the Public Information Office, Blue Cross of Greater Philadelphia, 1333 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19107.

11. Letter from Thomas M. Forbes, Assistant to the Superintendent for Personnel, Lower Merion School District (Ardmore, Pa.), dated November 5, 1973.

able rate for Army installations in the U. S. In comparison, in earlier quarters the excess had been as much as nine hours per employee over the maximum.[12]

Another reviewed program was aimed at reducing sick leave usage among clerical employees in a major state government office in Minnesota. The personnel office first examined literature to find reasons for high absenteeism. They were able to reject two of the reasons as not applicable to their organization--that absenteeism tends to be higher in times of full employment, and that it tends to be higher among recently employed workers. Other reasons dealt with employee dissatisfaction with supervisor and/or job. The results of a survey of the clerical employees in the 28 units were compared with the units' absentee records. A correlation between high absenteeism and general positive attitudes toward supervision was found (in direct opposition to the theories identified in literature). Further investigation revealed that the positive attitudes toward supervisors were the results of less emphasis by the supervisor upon rules within the work unit--including rules regarding the use of sick leave. Management then held positive, nonaccusatory sessions with supervisors to improve the supervisors' attitudes toward enforcement of rules and to solicit their suggestions for reducing high absenteeism. Ultimately the drop in sick leave usage by clerical employees amounted to 17 percent; the use of sick leave by the supervisory personnel dropped 34 percent.[13]

The results of a study of 28 departments in the municipal government of New York City reveal that the absence rates were lower in departments where:

> Attendance is kept in local work units rather than where attendance is kept by departmental timekeepers not responsible to the work unit supervisor.

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12. Johnson, Edgar H., Jr. "Control of Sick Leave." *Personnel Administration* 32: 35-39; January-February 1969.

13. Weitzel, William, and Bloedorn, John. "Action Research in Work Groups." *Personnel Administration* 33: 51-58; September-October 1970.

Special attention is given to excessive absentees.

New employees are informed of their rights, benefits and duties, and the relationship of their work to that of the department and of the city.

Relatively lenient penalties are given for lateness.[14]

Accordingly, recommendations were made that supervisors (1) be responsible for absence control within their units; (2) explain to new employees their rights, duties, and fringe benefits; and (3) encourage employees to discuss work problems with their supervisors.[15]

An analysis of the relationship between teacher remuneration and fringe benefit policies and the use of sick leave by teachers was conducted in 1968-69 by the Philadelphia Suburban School Study Council and the South Penn School Study Council.[16] Specifically, the study of the 56 school districts was designed to ascertain whether correlations exist between policies for supplemental remuneration and actual experience regarding teacher absenteeism. Thus, for each fringe benefit reported by participating districts, correlations were made between the absenteeism rate in districts providing the benefit and the rate in districts not providing the benefit. The results of these correlations appear in Table A.

The researchers conclude that, in general, the absentee-resistent district: (1) grants no more than the state minimum sick leave allowance (10 days a year); (2) requires proof of illness at the discretion of the administration or board; (3) requires teachers to report their illnesses by phone to the building principals

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14. Heneghan, Maureen, and Ginsburg, Sigmund G. "Use of Sick Leave" *Personnel Administration* 33: 49-50; September-October 1970.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 50

16. Philadelphia Suburban School Study Council and South Penn School Study Council. *Teacher Absenteeism and Related Policies for Supplemental Remuneration.* Philadelphia, Pa.: Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, 1970. 94 p.

Table A

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ABSENTEEISM AND SELECTED FACTORS AFFECTING TEACHERS IN 56 DISTRICTS SURVEYED BY PHILADELPHIA AREA SCHOOL STUDY COUNCILS, 1968-69

Factor studied	Absenteeism rates in districts:[a] with each factor studied	Absenteeism rates in districts:[a] without each factor studied
BENEFITS:		
Minimum salary over $5,800	5.40 days	4.72 days
Median salary $8,000-$8,999	4.88 days	4.90 days (median salary less than $8,000)
More than 10 days sick leave a year (state minimum)	5.05 days	4.73 days
Maternity leave granted	6.37 days (female teachers only)	7.22 days (female teachers only)
Bereavement leave beyond state minimum:		
Additional days granted	0.26 days of bereavement leave used	0.20 days of bereavement leave used
Leave extends to death of friend	0.21 days of bereavement leave used	0.11 days of bereavement leave used
Severance pay granted	6.09 days	5.43 days
Unused personal leave days are cumulative	0.53 days of personal leave used	0.57 days of personal leave used
OTHER FACTORS:		
More than 200 on teaching staff	6.29 days	5.98 days
Reasons for use of personal leave must be submitted	0.49 days of personal leave used	0.84 days of personal leave used
Proof of illness required	6.23 days	5.87 days
Answering service to take sick calls	5.79 days	4.54 days (calls made to building principal)
6-3-3 grade organization plan	6.45 days	5.87 days

a/ Unless otherwise indicated, absentee rates are the average used per teacher/per year and include all paid and unpaid personal benefit leaves granted.

SOURCE: Philadelphia Suburban School Study Council and South Penn School Study Council. *Teacher Absenteeism and Related Policies for Supplemental Remuneration.* Philadelphia, Pa.: Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, 1970. 94 p. $3.

(rather than to an answering service); (4) either grants no more than one day of personal leave a year or places the approval of all personal leave in the hands of the administration or board; (5) requires teachers to submit proof of illness for each use of sick leave; (6) does not provide maternity leave; (7) does not provide severance pay; (8) provides state minimum (3 days) for bereavement leave (for death of relative only); and (9) experienced less of a disparity of sick leave usage between females and males during 1968-69.[17]

Unevaluated Methods of Reducing Sick Leave Abuse

Three additional, but unevaluated, methods of reducing sick leave abuse were located. One, a Pennsylvania district's negotiated agreement with teachers, provides a bonus day (similar to a day of personal leave) for each 10 days of unused sick leave. An agreement in another Pennsylvania district provides for a sick leave bank into which teachers deposit unused sick leave and withdraw it in accordance with rules established by the teachers' association.[18] A third suggestion calls for unused sick leave to be added to the teacher's total years of employment as a means of augmenting retirement pay on a creditable service plan.[19] (An examination of the state teachers' retirement systems shows that no more than one state teachers' retirement system has a provision allowing credit for unused sick leave for the purpose of calculating retirement benefits--the Teachers' and State Employees' Retirement System of North Carolina which allows one month of credit for each 20 days or portion thereof of unused sick leave at time of retirement.[20])

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17. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

18. Fearen, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

19. Campbell, Edward I. "Sick Leave Abuse and What to Do About It: A Look At Government Employees." *Personnel* 47: 42-48; November-December 1970.

20. National Education Association, Office of Teacher Retirement. *Teacher Retirement Systems: A Summary of the 1971 Legal Provisions for Retirement Systems to Which Teachers Belong.* Washington, D. C.: The Association, 1972. p. 97.

Summary

The suggestions for reducing sick leave abuse, as considered in the various studies reported in this *Information Aid*, are summarized as follows:

Methods that provide a bonus or reward for unused sick leave:

- Allowing unlimited accumulation of unused sick leave
- Paying for unused sick leave, in whole or in part, at the end of each year
- Rewarding perfect attendance at the end of a given period
- Offering additional fringe benefits to entire employee group for stipulated reductions in sick leave usage
- Awarding of severance pay based in whole or in part on unused sick leave at time of retirement, death, or resignation
- Converting unused sick leave days to days of personal or vacation leave
- Establishing a sick leave bank into which employees deposit unused sick leave to be withdrawn by employees according to various stipulations
- Adding unused sick leave to the years of total service for the purpose of determining retirement pay on a creditable service plan

Methods that attempt to eliminate the reasons for sick leave abuse:

- Providing special preventive and diagnostic medical services for employees
- Emphasizing the benefits of allowing sick leave to accumulate
- Requiring employees to report illnesses to immediate supervisor rather than central office location
- Hiring a public health nurse or visiting nurse to investigate cases of habitual absenteeism
- Instilling in supervisors the importance of concern for each employees' welfare and health

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